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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 001174

SIPDIS

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TAGS: AORC PHUM DR

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S CALL ON DOMINICAN PRESIDENT MEJIA

Classified By: Ambassador Hans H. Hertell. Reason: 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Dominican President Hipolito Mejia heard out the Ambassador's request for the country to sponsor the Cuba resolution at the March session of the UNHCR but declined to make any commitment. Mejia said in the course of changes to be announced on national day he will remove several officials to whom the United States has objected. He described his plans for selecting a vice presidential candidate. End summary.

CUBA

¶2. (C) In response to Department inquiries, the Ambassador called on Dominican President Hipolito Mejia on February 23 and urged him to sponsor the resolution on Cuba to be presented to the meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission opening in Geneva on March 15. The Ambassador stressed the need for hemispheric solidarity against arrests of dissidents and Cuba's refusal to accept the visit of a duly constituted UNHCR rapporteur. He noted widespread support across the hemisphere for this approach and suggested that the Dominicans could play an important leadership role.

¶3. (C) Mejia replied that he has no interest in Castro and finds Cuba's actions unacceptable. The relationship between the Dominican Republic and Cuba is part of Caribbean history, however, and must be handled with extreme caution. That day he had met 40 Dominican students receiving grants to study medicine in Cuba, where there are a thousand Dominicans in higher education. "I didn't establish relations with Cuba" (a dig against his presidential opponent, former President Leonel Fernandez). Mejia said he had spoken out against Castro, including via Radio Marti, but he had done so in a personal capacity. "When is this up for discussion?" When he heard that the session opens in mid-March, Mejia accepted a copy of last year's resolution and of the draft of U.S. thoughts on the content of a 2004 resolution. "I will talk to Guerrero Prats" (the Foreign Ministry). The Ambassador indicated that the DCM had presented the same request to Vice Foreign Minister Pichardo the previous week. (That evening at a diplomatic function the Ambassador raised the matter directly Guerrero Prats, who pointed across the room at Mejia: "That's the only man who will be making the decision.")

HAITI

¶4. (C) Mejia said he had recently spoken to Haitian President Aristide by telephone. Aristide was worried, Mejia commented, and the North of Haiti was out of control. Despite the Carnival celebration in Port-au-Prince, a bomb had killed an army officer just at the corner of the presidential palace. Elements of the resistance were in Port-au-Prince and forces had occupied a village ten kilometers from the Dominican border post of Jimani. He had been informed that bandits were killing individuals near the border town of Juana Mendez, where 20,000 Haitians had come seeking to attend the weekly market. Dominican troops were on good behavior, respecting human rights, even though the young "gangsters" across the border were high on cocaine.

¶5. (C) As for Aristide, Mejia commented, there was no way of knowing how to read him. The conversation had been in Spanish. Aristide was "very clever." Aristide had made no request for help, even though he knew that Mejia had a helicopter available.

TRADE AGREEMENT

¶6. (C) The Ambassador raised the subject of the President's notification to Congress of the free trade agreement with the Central American states (CAFTA). Mejia was already aware that the notification did not cover the talks with the Dominican Republic, and he waved the point away as procedurally unimportant.

HUMAN RIGHTS, EXTRADITION & TRAFFICKING

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked about rumors of a change in the head of the National Police. Mejia replied that he had no intention of removing Gen. Jaime Marte Martinez, who is doing a "very good job." Mejia raised the subject of promised extraditions. Papers were ready for most of the 11

outstanding cases. Two of the detainees were serving prison terms for offenses in the Dominican Republic, so they were not yet available. One of the remaining suspects, according to staff at the Presidency and Attorney General's office, is probably not involved in the crime for which he was requested -- in their opinion, there is a confusion with the individual's brother. "But never mind that," said Mejia, "I told them to prepare the decree and he can face the charges."

(Mejia insisted that the Ambassador stay longer than scheduled, so that Mejia could sign the decrees in front of him that day.)

18. (C) "I am making some changes right after the National Day speech" (of February 27), the President said. He will remove Director of Immigration Miguel Vasquez, substituting him with retired Air Force General Rojas Taval (as heard), head of the Air Force in the 1990's and briefly head of the Armed Forces early in the Fernandez administration. Guido Gomez is leaving his position as Legal Advisor to the President (a fact that Gomez has been communicating for the past week to the media). "And I am withdrawing that ambassador to Argentina." (The Ambassador and Embassy have pressed for some time for this action, given reports of possible complicity in trafficking for prostitution in Argentina.) Mejia indicated that as for Radhames Garcia, the provincial representative intermittently on trial at the Supreme Court for trafficking Asians, Mejia does not have adequate control of the House of Representatives to move against him there.

POLITICS -- AND A VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

19. (C) Mejia said that he was going to constitute a PRD committee to choose a vice presidential running mate for him. "I'll give them a list -- some cadavers, some politicians, and some private sector." Mejia would prefer Manuel Alejandro Grullon, the president of the Banco Popular, well respected offspring of the Santiago banking family in his 40s. But the committee can pick whom they choose.

110. (C) The Ambassador told Mejia that many Dominicans were telling him that Mejia should negotiate with Fernandez and the PLD in order to escape prosecution if he loses the election. Mejia called the notion nonsense -- "absolutely not true, and I'm not negotiating with anybody." He finds it absurd that there are rumors of a plot against Leonel Fernandez ("that originated with a police recruit who is assigned to accompany the sergeant who's the driver for the PRD chairman"). And as for the discussion in the papers over the Feb 21-22 weekend concerning incorrect voting lists, "Those are the same lists used in 2000; and if they want to accuse anyone, they can blame Hatuey, because I have never had a hand on them." The Ambassador suggested that Mejia take the initiative to restate publicly his commitment to free and fair elections. (At the dinner with the diplomatic corps that evening, Mejia delivered exactly that message.)

COMMENT

111. (C) President Mejia was relaxed and cheerful; the Ambassador congratulated him upon arrival on celebrating his 63rd birthday. As usual, Mejia was talkative, jumping from subject to subject. He was the one to raise the removals of Dominican officials. As the Ambassador waited afterwards for the extradition papers to arrive, the President's sister Chavela Grullon dropped by the office. We believe that she has been playing an important role in keeping the dossier on trafficking alive with President Mejia.

HERTELL